

Chronicles of Loss

A more spiritual dimension of black poetry is conjured in Dolores Kendrick's *Why the Woman Is Singing on the Corner* (Peter E. Randall, \$16.95), a book-length narrative poem. Kendrick tells the story of Ophelia, a black woman who receives visitations from spirits of her past, before she plummets dismally, like her Shakespearian namesake, into madness. The bulk of the story records Ophelia's history of loss—loss of her sister, of her mother, of her daughter, of her husbands. As many contemporary black women writers do, Kendrick suggests a greater sisterhood, a commonality in the experiences of all black women.

At the narrative's beginning there is some confusion for the reader. As in a Faulkner novel, the reader must work through a series of ambiguous personal pronouns, time shifts and stream-of-consciousness effects. The effort to decipher the plot proves exquisitely rewarding. The reader's ear attunes itself to the language's skillful condensation and mythic passion. Dolores Kendrick, the District of Columbia's poet laureate, has a powerful and original voice. Her lines are pleasing to read aloud, and frequently recitation clarifies the confusions of the page.

Kendrick shares with Toni Morrison the ability not only to tell a story from a woman's point of view, but also actually to create a world as perceived by a woman. Her images seem extensions of a woman's body, sensualized through the process of feminine perception. This world-as-womb effect reaches its height in the following passage:

Now I tell you child, we Black women, we must be careful.
Not too much out here for us, you know? . . .

Sometimes I believe I came out of the sea, the big ocean
while the waves were yelping and the sky screaming and
I gave me a birth. You know, from water.

Wasn't no man involved. Didn't need one. Only me
and that yelping sea, bringing forth from an opening in
the sky in pain.

You see, child, we Black women must be careful because
I think sometimes we defy nature, and when we do that
we have to be punished.

No retelling of *Why the Woman is Singing on the Corner* as a prose narrative could reproduce Kendrick's pendulum-like rhythms or convey its true poetic achievement. At the same time, comparisons with Morrison's peculiarly rich, colorful style do suggest a sense of Kendrick's voice, and dedicated readers of Morrison should consider reading Kendrick. ■

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POETRY

Reviewed by *Darryl Lorenzo Wellington*

Past, present and future converge in recent collections of African-American verse.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2002

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The Washington Post Dec 1, 2002

(Holiday Books)

BOOK WORLD RAVES

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Saving Room for Dessert. By K.C. Constantine (Mysterious). Transforms the mundane duties of [three police patrolmen] into high drama. An author who can write rings around any number of American novelists of literary renown. *RL*

Watchers of Time. By Charles Todd (Bantam). Post-World War I England... an atmosphere thick with melancholy and longing, one that showcases sympathetic characters brilliantly. *KM*

POETRY

Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam. Ed. by Tony Medina & Louis Reyes Rivera (Three Rivers). An important document of a cultural movement, of poets plying their art at arm's length from the upper echelons of academia. *Darryl Lorenzo Wellington*

Collected Poems. By Federico García Lorca; ed. by Christopher Maurer (FSG). We witness how the poet transcended his... limitations and in the process not only expanded the scope of lyric poetry but also entirely redefined the elegy. *Rafael Campoy*

A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired By the Work of Joseph Cornell. Ed. by Jonathan Safran Foer (Art Publishers). This marvelous anthology shows how many various seives have been



Portrait of Dante from "Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings," by Tom Henry and Laurence Kanter (Rizzoli, \$85)

someone who simply needs to talk. *Chris King*

*** Why the Woman is Singing On the Corner.** By Dolores Kendrick (Peter E. Randall). Her images seem extensions of a woman's body, sensualized through the process of feminine perception. No retelling as a prose work could reproduce Kendrick's pendulum-like rhythms or convey its true poetic achievement. *DLW*

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

The Alchemist's Door. By Lisa Goldstein (Tor). An extraordinary tale in which [16th-century mathematician] John Dee meets Rabbi Judah Loew, creator of the Golem. [Goldstein] has written an award-worthy novel that should be remembered when compiling your Christmas and Chanukah lists. *Fiona Kelleghan*

Chindi. By Jack McDevitt (Ace). The mystery-plot structure of *Chindi* provides a marvelous expectation of profound experiences that lie just ahead. *FK*

The Great Escape. By Ian Watson (Golden Gryphon). His stories exhibit a cosmopolitanism, maturity, wit and existential depth not often associated with American writers who have emerged—however belatedly and distantly—from a pulp tradition. *Paul Di Filippo*

SpaceLand. By Rudy Rucker (Tor). Like the mutant offspring of Jonathan Swift and Philip José Farmer, Rudy Rucker finds mankind a species whose glorious buffoonery is matched only by its capacity to laugh at itself. *PDF*

The Years of Rice and Salt. By Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam). Robinson's richest, most subtle and moving novel, a meditation on history and humanism that abjures easy answers and ends up knowing more than it tells. *Gregory Feeley*

Zuntig. By Tom La Farge (Green Integer). Zuntig, a swamp ape whose intelligence and initiative have led her to covet the leadership of her matriarchal society, sets about winning the approval of the tribe's Dispenser. Unflaggingly witty and surprising, *Zuntig* reinvents itself with every chapter. *GF*

A Scattering of Jades. By Alexander Irvine (Tor). Irvine's prose is rich and evocative, his plot tightly structured and beautifully paced. The denouement, when it arrives, offers no easy answers; each of the principals leave the scene damaged. *Farrah Mendlesohn Stories of Your Life and Others.* By Ted Chiang (Tor). Summarizing these stories does not do justice to Chiang's talent. Seemingly ordinary ideas are pursued ruthlessly, their tendons flayed, their bones exposed. Chiang derides lazy thinking, weasels it out of its hiding place and leaves it covering. *FM*